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RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 6866
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SUBJECT: BIHAR FLOODS: MILLIONS DISPLACED, INDIAN RESCUE
EFFORTS AT CRUCIAL STAGE

11. (SBU) Summary: Nearly two weeks after the Kosi River in Bihar jumped its banks and caused the worst flooding in 50 years, millions have been displaced and half a million remain stranded in rural villages. More than 90 are reported dead, according to unofficial estimates, a toll that is sure to grow sharply as bodies are recovered. Flood victims in a remote corner of Bihar, one of India's poorest and most populous states, have gone without food for days in what Indian government and USAID contacts have described as a "crucial and final stage" of rescue efforts. Meanwhile, United Nation's Children's Fund (UNICEF) India and Bihar-based NGOs worry that contagious disease may break out and exacerbate the humanitarian situation in the cramped relief shelters, where a quarter million displaced people are living. In response to Ambassador Mulford's disaster declaration on August 28, the USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) made an initial contribution of USD 100,000 to Bihar flood relief. Based on a field assessment of flood-affected areas, OFDA will determine additional needs for relief and recovery by September 18. The floods in Bihar have exposed confusion, breakdowns in emergency preparedness and a leadership vacuum at all levels. Although the Bihar state government has taken the brunt of the criticism for its slow response, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government in New Delhi was equally ill-prepared for the scale of the disaster. End Summary.

Worst Flooding in 50 Years

12. (U) The Kosi River in Bihar breached an embankment across the border in Nepal on August 18, causing the worst floods in the area in 50 years. The Kosi often floods the Bihar plains during monsoon season, but this year's floods are particularly devastating as they have affected areas unaccustomed to high water levels. More than 3 million people over 394 square miles have been affected by the flooding and over a quarter of a million people have been evacuated, the Bihar government said on August 29. One state-level disaster management official told us that the relief machinery in Bihar has managed to evacuate 800,000 flood victims. However, as water levels have started to recede, some flood victims have chosen to stay where they are

and that the "administration cannot force them (to leave)." The death toll in the state has been difficult to determine. Bihar emergency management officials have reported 42 deaths, but actual deaths are expected to be much higher as the official death toll accounts for only recovered bodies. Local NGOs working on flood relief have estimated that the death toll could be as high as 2,000 people.

13. (U) After days of delay and mounting criticism of its sluggish response, the Indian government stepped up evacuation and relief on August 28, committing USD 230 million in federal disaster relief and mobilizing resources to evacuate flood victims spread over 15 districts. As of September 3, federal and state authorities had set up more than 270 relief shelters and healthcare camps. The Indian armed forces have moved on "war footing" to assist with rescue operations, dispatching rescue boats and air-dropping emergency supplies and food packets to the half million who have been left stranded by the rising waters.

USG Steps Up

14. (SBU) The USG has responded to the crisis with an initial USD 100,000 that Ambassador Mulford requested in a disaster declaration on August 28. USAID has requested the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) to conduct a field assessment of flood affected areas to determine additional needs for relief and recovery. Based on their visits to the flooded areas, OFDA officials will provide an

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initial assessment by September 18.

Possible Humanitarian Crisis, Says UNICEF India

15. (SBU) But the tragedy is not entirely nature's doing. UNICEF India representative Karin Hulshof told Poloff on September 3 that the situation due to flooding continues to be serious and unpredictable, and that the state faces a "major humanitarian crisis" if the Indian state and federal governments do not step up rescue and relief efforts. Nearly two weeks after the scale of flooding became apparent, tens of thousands are still trapped on rooftops, elevated roads or surrounded by water in distant villages. Six critical areas in the districts of Sepaul and Madhepura are without food and water. Government officials estimate that 60,000 to 80,000 people need to be rescued in these two districts, but NGOs indicated a much higher count of 500,000.

UPA government leaders have placed the blame squarely on the shoulders of the Janata Dal-United (JD-U) - BJP allied state government for failing to provide adequate rescue and relief to flood victims. Following a visit to flood-affected areas, Railway Minister Lalu Prasad on September 3 accused the state government of negligence "on all fronts," alleging that Chief Minister Nitish Kumar has managed relief and rescue operations casually.

16. (U) Experts and aid agencies blame both state and federal government for not only mishandling relief but also for failing to warn people of rising floodwaters. One example of state government mismanagement reported by the newspaper Mail Today: emergency fax messages sent by engineers at the Kosi dam warning of impending disaster were ignored in Bihar's capital Patna. The faxes piled up on the relevant bureaucrat's desk because he was on leave and no deputy had been assigned. Calling for "prosecutions for criminal negligence", the paper noted that no one reacted even when warnings were sent to other officials.

17. (U) Meanwhile, anger is mounting and stick-wielding victims have resorted to looting food warehouses and trucks in some areas. Tens of thousands have crowded into unsanitary relief camps, where tensions are growing over the desperate lack of emergency supplies. UNICEF's Hulshof

indicated that the heat combined with limited supplies of safe drinking water and poor hygiene conditions may become a fertile feeding ground for water and vector-borne diseases such as cholera and typhoid.

Missed Opportunity to Prevent Floods?

18. (U) Arguments have developed over whether the Bihar flooding could have been prevented. The Kosi River's flow is regulated by a barrage on the Nepalese side of the border. It was built in the late 1950s and, according to analysts, was meant to be a "short-term solution" for 20 to 30 years. Analysts have blamed the Government of India for inadequate repair and maintenance of the embankment. (Note: Under a joint agreement with Nepal, India agreed to pay for the maintenance of the river embankment. End Note.)

19. (U) Others have called for joint India-Nepal efforts to address massive natural silting issue along the river embankment. Environmentalists say that both governments should have worked to de-silt the Kosi River, which is prone to quickly change course leaves behind heavy silt and debris. Along these lines, senior BJP leader L.K. Advani met Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on September 3 to discuss joint efforts with Nepali counterparts to address recurring floods in Bihar. "In today's situation, everybody should come together to help rather than indulging in mud slinging," Advani added in an attempt to temper earlier criticism from

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Railway Minister Lalu Prasad and other UPA leaders.

The Politics of Disaster Relief

110. (U) Indian politicians have actively engaged in Bihar flood relief projects ahead of competitive state assembly elections later this year and national elections due by May 2009. Leading the pack is Union Railway Minister Lalu Prasad Yadav, who has announced an assistance package worth USD 2 million from the Railway Minister's Welfare and Relief Fund. He also encouraged all 33,000 railway employees to donate a day's salary to flood relief and has not missed an opportunity to talk about the USD 23,000 prize money from a popular Indian television game show that he donated to flood victims.

111. (U) When asked why he created a separate fund from the Bihar Chief Minister's Fund, Prasad said, "We are setting up this fund for our own satisfaction. We want to make sure this money reaches the needy." He went on to accuse Chief Minister Kumar of "criminal negligence," noting the 500,000 victims left stranded in devastated floods. Following Prasad's lead, Congress MP from Rajasthan Sachin Pilot has urged Speaker Somnath Chatterjee to consider asking all MPs to use their MP Local Area Development funds outside their constituencies. Pilot said that he would personally donate USD 230,000 to flood victims. BJP president Rajnath Singh set up the party's own Bihar Calamity Fund of more than USD 117,500 on September 2 and announced that the party would adopt one of the flood-affected villages. Meanwhile, Samajwadi Party leaders Mulayam Singh Yadav and Amar Singh visited flood-hit regions on September 3 and are expected to donate USD 23,000 to relief fund.

Comment: A Grim Situation

112. (SBU) With a mangle of federal, state, city and private recovery efforts under way, the current state of the relief effort is murky. The humanitarian situation in Bihar remains grim and -- as information trickles in about destruction, human displacement, and death tolls -- may even be deteriorating by some measures. Tens of thousands remain stranded in the worst affected districts of Supaul,

Madhepura, and Araria, as the Government of India continues to struggle with search and rescue operations and food runs out. Equally alarming is the lack of preparedness at all levels of authority to provide emergency relief to assist the more than three million people displaced by floods and, as a result, the threat of a worsening humanitarian situation remains. In all probability, the after effects of flooding in Bihar will continue for months, and substantial rehabilitation efforts will be required by the Indian and the international humanitarian assistance community.

Comment: Political Fallout

¶13. (SBU) In the aftermath of flooding, a new political storm is brewing in New Delhi and Patna over the inadequate government response to the disaster in Bihar. Much of the criticism is directed at the JD(U) - BJP state government. The UPA has also been heavily criticized for the delayed emergency response to assist the 500,000 stranded flood victims. The flood has also provided an opportunity for some. Former Chief Minister of Bihar and current Indian Railways Minister Lalu Prasad Yadav, whose star was declining in the state, was able to strengthen his appeal by using his Railways Ministry to mobilize relief. Ahead of hotly contested state assembly elections in November 2008 and national elections due by May 2009, the fumbled government response to Bihar flood relief is expected to be an important

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elections issue. End Comment.
MULFORD